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ABSTRACT

A task force appointed by the governor developed Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards to encourage a higher level of learning for all public school students. The standards describe the skills children should have and the things they should know by the end of grades 4, 8, and 12. Every subject is divided into content standards that tell what students should know and be able to do. Each subject is also divided into performance standards that tell how students will show that they can meet the content standards. Proficiency standards are a third category, one that tells how well students have learned the content, and these standards have been developed for the five subjects covered in statewide tests. Model academic standards have also been developed for 14 subjects not covered by the state achievement tests. This guide also contains information about the tests Wisconsin students will take to demonstrate achievement: (1) the Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Tests; (2) the Knowledge and Concepts Examinations; and (3) the High School Graduation Test. A final section of this guide discusses ways parents can help their children do better in school. (SLD)

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A Parent's Guide to Standards and Assessment

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WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
DEDICATED TO CHILDREN AND LEARNING

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A Parent's Guide to Standards and Assessment

The State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council wants you to know about Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and the Wisconsin Student Assessment System.

Parents of school-age children find that some things have remained the same since they went to school and that some things have changed. In the last 20 years, schools have experienced many changes in "academic standards," "curriculum," and "assessment." What exactly do these terms mean? How are they connected? How can parents help children do better in school?

In this brochure, the term "parent" also refers to the child's primary caregiver(s), such as grandparents or others who have primary responsibility for the child.

What are academic standards?

A governor's appointed task force developed Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards to encourage a higher level of learning from all public school students. Members included legislators, educators, business people, and parents. The standards describe the skills children should have and the things they should know by the end of grades 4, 8, and 12.

Each subject a child learns about in school is divided into content standards that tell what students should know and be able to do. Each subject is also divided into performance standards that tell how students will show they meet the content standards.

Finally, a third type of standard – proficiency standards that tell how well students have learned the content – has been developed for the five subjects covered in statewide tests. Many parents are most interested in the proficiency standards because schools report these standards to parents. Proficiency standards exist for mathematics, science, social studies, reading, and language arts.

Model academic standards have also been developed for 14 other subjects not covered by the state tests: agricultural education, business education, dance education, environmental education, family and consumer education, foreign languages, health education, information and technology literacy, marketing education, music education, physical education, technology education, theatre education, and visual arts education.

A complete listing of standards for all subjects is available on the DPI Standards Home Page at www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/standards **or by checking with your school principal.**

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How is a Child's learning progress measured?

How do the academic standards work in your child's classroom?

School boards may either adopt Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards or develop and adopt their own. Most school boards have adopted the model standards.

Teaching, learning, and testing should all be connected to the academic standards. Each day, classroom teachers refer to a plan, called a curriculum, that outlines what a child should learn day-to-day in the classroom. The curriculum consists of activities and lessons at each grade level, instructional materials, and teaching techniques. Every school year, children deepen their knowledge of a subject by learning new concepts based upon what they learned in the past.

Children learn differently. Some enjoy learning by reading or examining things. Others learn best by listening to someone speak. And some learn most when they can use their hands or bodies. A curriculum should be designed in a number of ways to ensure that the learning styles and needs of all children in the classroom are met.

The curricula that school districts have developed are used to prepare students to meet the standards. The standards define what is to be learned at certain points in time and what performances are accepted as evidence that the student has learned.

Parents can get more specific information about the connection among the academic standards, the curriculum, and the tests in their school district from their children's teachers, the school principal, or the guidance counselor. The DPI website at www.dpi.state.wi.us also explains these connections.

Schools should welcome parents' questions about and interest in the curriculum, state standards and tests. The stronger the home-school connection is at all levels, the more prepared children are to meet the standards.

Schools use many ways to measure the progress of students: homework completion, class projects, portfolios, unit tests, and student effort. Another way to measure student progress statewide is with state tests. In Wisconsin, the state Department of Public Instruction develops and administers statewide examinations to measure children's learning in five subject areas:

- reading
- language arts
- mathematics
- science
- social studies

The statewide tests that children take help improve teaching and learning. The tests are based on Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards. For example, a fourth-grade student's score on the statewide mathematics test will be reported in terms of the standards established for learning at fourth grade. The DPI website at www.dpi.state.wi.us reports summaries of proficiency scores for all public schools statewide.

Schools are required to report test results to parents of students in fourth, eighth, and tenth grades, as well as for the high school graduation test. Children will take state tests, or tests developed by the school district, at school. Some students with special education needs may be able to take the state tests with accommodations or may participate in alternative assessments that meet goals described in their individual education plans. Parents can excuse their children from taking the tests. Below is a list of the types of tests children will take at the appropriate grades:

Test	Grade(s)
Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test	3
Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination	4, 8, 10
High School Graduation Test	11, 12

The test scores will show how each child is doing in the tested areas. It is important to note that the state examinations do not test students on *all* of the academic standards for that subject area. Although the state tests do a good job of measuring student achievement of the standards, one test cannot measure *everything* that children have learned. Instead, the state tests attempt to provide parents and teachers with an overall picture of areas that each child has learned well and those he or she may need to improve.

The tests measure a child's performance at one point in time and can be valuable tools in identifying areas of strength for each child and areas where additional help is needed. The tests also help schools measure the effectiveness of their curriculum and where to make changes, if needed.

More about the tests children will take:
THE WISCONSIN STUDENT ASSESSMENT SYSTEM (WSAS)

Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test

This test is taken by third graders over a three-week period each spring. The test is given in three sessions and is not timed. Most children finish each session in about an hour. The purpose is to identify a child's reading level compared to statewide proficiency standards for third-grade children. The test results are important because:

- Parents are informed about their child's reading comprehension skills, or how well children understand the material they read. Test scores will fall into one of four levels: advanced, proficient, basic, or minimal performance.
- Based on the scores, parents and teachers can decide whether additional instruction is needed. Teachers and other school staff can talk with parents about ideas for improving skills and learning at school and at home.
- School districts can judge how well their reading programs work and can change them, if needed.

The Knowledge and Concepts Examinations

These tests are given statewide to students statewide in the fourth, eighth, and tenth grades each year. The tests measure knowledge and skills in five subject areas: mathematics, science, social studies, reading, and language arts. Students are tested on *some* of the knowledge and skills in Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards. All of the content contained in those standards is not covered by these tests.

NORM-REFERENCED SCORES.

These scores compare children with each other. For example, an eighth-grade student who scores in the 75th percentile in science has done as well as or better than 75% of the eighth-graders nationally who took the test at the same time of year.

PROFICIENCY LEVELS.

These levels indicate how well children have learned the knowledge and skills tested when compared to a set standard. In Wisconsin, these standards are called proficiency standards. These proficiency levels were set by Wisconsin teachers, independent of norm-referenced scores. Therefore, it is possible for a child to have a high percentile score (a norm-referenced score) but not score at the advanced level. The proficiency levels were set as *goals* to which students and schools can aspire. Each proficiency level includes a range of scores. There are four proficiency levels:

- **Advanced:** distinguished achievement. Student shows an in-depth understanding of academic knowledge and skills tested.
- **Proficient:** student is competent in the important academic and knowledge and skills tested.
- **Basic:** student is somewhat competent in the academic knowledge and skills tested.
- **Minimal performance:** student shows limited achievement in the academic knowledge and skills tested.

Testing and Grade Advancement

In October 1999, the Wisconsin legislature passed new legislation affecting student testing and grade advancement, which is scheduled to become effective September 1, 2002, for the 2002-2003 school year. The legislation requires each school board to adopt written criteria for advancing students from fourth to fifth grade and from eighth to ninth grade. The board policy must include the student's score on the fourth and eighth grade state tests, the student's academic performance, the recommendations of teachers (which are to be based only on academic performance), and any other academic criteria specified by the school board.

Local school boards may use the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations or adopt another examination. These tests must be offered twice a year to fourth and eighth grade students. Parents may excuse their children from taking these tests.

Parents may contact the school principal, guidance counselor, or a member of their school board with questions about this new legislation.

High School Graduation Test

A high school graduation requirement for Wisconsin public school students will begin in the 2003-2004 school year. State legislation passed in 1999 requires each local school board to adopt written criteria for public high school graduation. In addition to course unit requirements, board policy must include a student's graduation test score, academic achievement, and teachers' recommendations. The state-developed graduation test will be based on the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards. Local school boards may use the state-developed test or adopt another test. All students must be given at least four opportunities to take the graduation test adopted by their local school board, beginning in eleventh grade.

Parents may excuse their children from this testing requirement. State law requires that the student's score on the graduation test (whether it is the state test or a locally developed test) be placed on their transcript. Transcripts will also indicate that students excused from the tests did not take them. The new policy requirement applies to all students in ninth grade during the 2000-2001 school year and all future classes.

Watch for more information from local school boards about the graduation requirements. For specific questions, check with school guidance counselors or principals.

Getting Involved: Ways to Help Your Child Do Better in School

The long-term goal of the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) is for all students to show they have mastered the skills and knowledge in the subject areas tested. Since parents will always be their children's most important teacher, it's a good idea to learn more about Wisconsin's testing system, so you can help your students get the most from their education.

Please talk with your teachers about your children's progress in school. They need to hear from you to help them do their jobs better.

Special thanks to my Parent Advisory Council for insisting that we develop this brochure.

John T. Benson
State Superintendent

MAY 2000

Please note: The information contained in this brochure is accurate at the time of publication. Because some of the issues explained, such as testing and grade advancement, will be up for further discussion in the Wisconsin Legislature, parents should be aware that changes may occur.

The state tests will test students only on the content of the Model Academic Standards in four areas: language arts (including reading), mathematics, science, and social studies.

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards form the basis for the knowledge and skills tests. State law required school boards to adopt these standards, or local standards, by August 1, 1998, for at least reading and writing, geography and history, mathematics, and science. Ask if your school board has adopted the standards. Ask to review a copy.

The curriculum in your child's school should help students meet or exceed the Model Academic Standards.

Ask if the curriculum in your child's school is up-to-date with the standards. This is especially important if your child will be taking a state-developed high school graduation test, since these scores are reported on your child's high school transcripts. Many schools will probably need some time to align their curriculum with the new standards, which were completed in 1998.

If you have questions about the curriculum used in your child's school, contact your school principal. Many schools ask parents to serve on curriculum committees to represent families' interests and communicate to families the issues considered by the committee. Request that copies of Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and your school's curriculum be made available in your public library, your community family center, or other places so community members can be aware of their content.

You have the right to review the tests taken by your child after testing is completed.

All school districts have copies of test booklets. Contact your school principal to review the tests.

If your child scores in a lower proficiency level, even in grade 4, you should be concerned.

A low proficiency score in grade 4 is an early warning that your child may need help to develop the knowledge and skills required for that grade. Talk to your child's teacher to learn what skills and knowledge need additional work. Ask the teacher for learning ideas you can do at home or for strategies to improve study skills.

You can be a real force in motivating your school to help all students learn more and test better.

Review your child's proficiency scores, but also examine how well the students in your child's school did on the state tests compared to other schools of its size and demographic makeup. View the School Proficiency Summary on the DPI web site (www.dpi.state.wi.us) or ask your school principal or district administrator for a copy.

Work with your school's parent group or your school principal to hold a forum for parents to learn more about your school curriculum and state testing. Invite parents to express their ideas about skills they want their child to possess, and to talk about how families might partner with the school to increase learning.

You can be an advocate for your child and your school.

Get involved in school improvement and policy making. Attend school board meetings. Volunteer to serve on task forces, committees, and in your child's classroom. Encourage other parents to get involved, too. Your presence will help the school be more responsive to families' natural desires to help their children learn.

You can help your child test better and learn confidently.

Don't wait for your child's first set of test scores to take positive action. Set aside a few minutes each night to review homework with your child. If your child is having trouble understanding a concept or completing homework, talk to your child's teachers about learning strategies you can both use in class and at home. Check out the U.S. Department of Education web site at http://ed.gov for lots of learning resources and ideas for parents. Always feel free to talk to your child's teachers about other learning strategies you can use at home.

For more information...

For more information about academic standards, tests and examinations, open enrollment, family-community partnerships with schools, and many other topics, call the Department of Public Instruction toll-free at 1-800-441-4563. Or, visit the DPI website at: http://www.dpi.state.wi.us A search page at the DPI website allows you to view your School Proficiency Summary. To do so, go to http//www.dpi.state.wi.us/oea/kce.html Click on "test results."

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